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Exhibition review: Dalziel and Scullion, Tumadh: Immersion, Curated by Kate Grenyer, Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh, August 1–September 13, 2014; An Lanntair in Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis, July 5–August 30, 2014

Citation for published version:

Morris, N 2015, 'Exhibition review: Dalziel and Scullion, Tumadh: Immersion, Curated by Kate Grenyer, Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh, August 1–September 13, 2014; An Lanntair in Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis, July 5–August 30, 2014', *The Senses and Society*, vol. 10, no. 2.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2015.1042250>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/17458927.2015.1042250](https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2015.1042250)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

The Senses and Society

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Dalziel and Scullion, *Tumadh: Immersion*

Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh, August 1 – September 13, 2014

Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh and An Lanntair in Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis (July 5 – August 30, 2014)

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Dundee-based artists Dalziel and Scullion's art practice explores the complex and oftentimes fraught relationship between humans and the natural world. Concerned by the increasing dislocation of people from the natural world and the future legacy for both, their work raises questions about the knowledge required to facilitate a "shift in human values and behaviours and [...] where this knowledge resides."¹ Inspired by philosopher David Abram, journalist Richard Louv, and other environmental/ecological artists such as Giuseppe Penone and Olafur Eliasson, Dalziel and Scullion advocate the need to pay closer attention to sensory experience for therein, they argue, lays the key to an alignment with the larger ecology (Abram 1997; Little 2014). For Dalziel and Scullion, to be "sensually aware is to be engaged and so to lose

the distinction between self and other, between nature and human nature. Perception thus defined, is a form of attention, or tending to, and implies relationship and so responsibility” (Little 2014: 237). Through their they aim to “challenge the perspective of the audience, allowing them to feel and experience landscape differently, perhaps even place alternative values on the environmental aspects they encounter in their own day-to-day lives” (Aesthetica.blog 2014).²

Figure 1. Dalziel and Scullion, *Immersion Garments* (2014), installation view, Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh. Photo: courtesy of the artists.

Figure 2. Dalziel and Scullion, *Walking Dress* (2014), installation view, Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh. Photo: courtesy of the artists.

Part of the Scotland-wide GENERATION (2014) exhibition program, Dalziel and Scullion’s *Tumadh: Immersion* was a dual-site installation incorporating three-dimensional works, film, and photography.³ Together, the two parts of the exhibition worked as a “coherent and related whole” creating a dialogue between island and city but also independently prompting people to reconsider their surrounding environment (Dovecot Studios 2014). This review focuses on the five works exhibited at the Dovecot site, a refurbished former public baths which now houses the 100 year old Dovecot tapestry workshop and gallery space. The South Gallery featured a set of related installations: garments fashioned from Harris Tweed styled on the outdoor clothing one would normally don when preparing for outdoor recreation; a film of the garments

being worn on location outdoors in Scotland which illustrated their functional qualities; and, a sculptural Victorian walking dress, the hyper-extended craggy train of which cut across the space like the bulk of a glacier.⁴ In the North Gallery, one found eight illuminated photographs of Hebridean skylscapes or “slices of sky”;⁵ and, “a steel drawing of a fractal, cliff-like form” (Dovecot Studios 2014) on which were displayed seven delicately-striated three-billion-year-old Lewisian gneiss boulders.⁶ On the walls of each gallery quotes from Abram’s *Becoming Animal* (2011) provided further stimulus.

The overriding message of *Tumadh: Immersion* was “slow down and pay more attention,” a theme continued from the duo’s previous work *Rosnes Benches* (2014) in Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland, a series of low ergonomic platforms or ‘sockets’ which enable users to “tune into the frequencies of their surroundings” (Rosnes Bench n.d.). For Dalziel and Scullion “real immersion in nature requires active concentration and involvement”; only through attentive and continuous perception will humans develop the sensory acuity that will help them understand more fully their connection with the natural world (Dovecot Studios 2014; Friesen 2005). In *Tumadh: Immersion*, each of the conceptual “immersion garments” suggested different ways in which individuals could create opportunities for themselves to become absorbed in and by the natural world on an everyday basis. For example, the neoprene padded back of the *Recumbent* jacket (the mobile equivalent of the *Rosnes* benches) allowed wearers to lay comfortably supine wherever they chose an act that enabled the senses of smell and hearing come to the fore (Aesthetica.blog 2014); the *Rain* cape’s rubber collar exposed the wearer’s head to the conditions of the surroundings, thus enabling one to feel rain on the face, an

experience most would normally try to avoid (Palenske 2014); the *Gatherer* coat's pockets and backpack enabled wearers to collect specimens for later study; and the hood of the *Silhouette* anorak, when pulled over the head, allowed wearers to mimic the shape of an erratic boulder to hide their human profile and enabling the observation of fauna undetected.

Figure 3. Dalziel and Scullion, *Air and Conglomerate* (2014), installation view, Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh. Photo: courtesy of the artists.

Figure 4. Dalziel and Scullion, *Rosnes Benches* (2014), installation view, Dumfries and Galloway Dark Skies Park. Photo: courtesy of the artists.

Aiming to counteract the “deadening of the senses in everyday life,” the exhibition encouraged people to be proactive in taking a “renewed sensory engagement with the ‘vibrant matter’ of which we are made and in which we are embedded” (Little 2014: 238). Often this will involve seeking a fresh perspective (Friesen 2005) on that which might be ordinarily ignored. Take the sky, for example, humans must tilt their heads to view it fully, but a simple repositioning of the body will facilitate the contemplation of varying cloud formations. Paying attention to multi-sensory detail, Dalziel and Scullion argue, is fundamental to the shift in values that must accompany future collaboration with non-human agents (Little 2014). As Abram explains, “when we really awake to the life of our senses [...] we discover that nothing in the world around us is directly experienced as a passive or inanimate object – each thing has its

own secrets and experience.” If matter is spoken of as “essentially inanimate or inert, [it] establish[es] the need for a graded hierarchy of beings [and as such] continually isolate[s] human awareness above and apart from the sensuous world rather than in the midst of a living web (1997: n.p.). As Louise Scullion points out, “every stone has an amazing geological story, yet [to most people] it’s just a boulder” (ArtinScotlandTV 2014). It is only when human’s role as “dominant shapers of the landscape” (a role that once belonged to the glaciers) is acknowledged, and other forms of agency in the natural world recognized, will society be able to move forwards towards a truly sustainable co-dependent future.

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¹ See Dovecot Studios (2014) and Little (2014: 236).

² On the affective power of art, see Louv (2012), Little (2014), and Hawkins and Straughan (2014).

³ *Tumadh* is the Gaelic translation of “immersion.”

⁴ The tweed clothing was designed by Dalziel and Scullion but crafted by seamstress Tracey Stewart Thompson. The soundtrack to the film was composed by folk musician Aidan O’Rourke.

⁵ Unless otherwise attributed, all quotes by the artists are from an interview with the author on June 12, 2014.

⁶ This was the only element shared by both exhibitions. However, in Stornoway the boulders were 345 million-year-old red sandstone from the mainland.